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New flows bring life back to section of Coosa River

River flows have been returned to a 20-mile section of the Coosa River as part of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's (FERC) hydro relicensing process on the river.

A flow schedule was developed and implemented by engineers and biologists at Alabama Power, along with state and federal biologists, as a result of FERC license renewal negotiations with Alabama Power and a host of local stakeholders. The new water flow will restore habitat and launch recreational activities, such as fishing, canoeing and kayaking.

To create more efficient generation conditions, construction of Weiss Dam redirected flow away from 20 miles of the original river channel in 1960. Discussions about restoring some of these flows began with the discovery in 1998 of an endangered mussel in the original river channel below Terrapin Creek.

"The new flow regime, thanks to our partners at the ADCNR and Alabama Power, will deliver a constant flow somewhat similar to what it was prior to 1960," said Jeff Powell, Senior Aquatic Biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "This flow will provide agencies the unique opportunity to reintroduce many native fishes and mollusk species back into historically occupied areas. As a result, these reintroductions will allow the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to work toward species recovery and eventually removing species from the Endangered Species List."

Like many of the rivers in the Southeast, the Coosa features a tremendous number of freshwater snails, mussels, fishes and crayfishes – once supporting the greatest freshwater snail fauna in the world. Although some of those species may have been lost during the last century to river development, increasing water flow to sections of the Coosa offers the unique opportunity study efforts to restore a portion of the fauna previously absent from the river.

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In the past, the bypass channel received infrequent flow from Weiss Lake. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) have been working with Alabama Power to determine the specific flows and improve water quality at the same time.

“Introducing flows in this section of river channel has been a central focus of our regulators and multiple stakeholders during the Coosa relicensing process,” said Jim Crew. “This process provides everyone involved the opportunity to study the impacts of these flows on the river."

According to ADCNR Fisheries Section Chief Stan Cook, the restoration of flow down the original Coosa River channel is a remarkable event and is the result of years of hard work by the individuals and groups involved in the project. Biologists believe the improved flows will boost the health and habitat quality of the Coosa River.

“The river has the ability to heal itself – providing fish and mussel habitat necessary to meet their life cycle needs by delivering water that mimics a natural flowing stream,” Cook said. “I believe we have a plan in place to accomplish a restored river reach. I would like to thank Alabama Power, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the many employees of Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and other individuals and organizations that made this happen.”

Paul Johnson, Program Supervisor of ADCNR’s Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center near Marion, Ala., echoes the importance of returning water flow to this section of the Coosa.

“Returning this portion of the river to a more natural flow condition will make it possible for ADCNR to return not only rare and listed species to the river channel, but several sport fish species as well,” Johnson said.

Reintroduction efforts are planned in the 20-mile section of river. However, efforts will be tempered as biologists monitor the new flow schedule. Plans are being made to release some non-listed species within a year.